Top Stories Headlines

Wednesday September 12 1:08 PM ET

FBI Storms Hotel in Boston

BOSTON (AP) - A heavily armed FBI team searching for suspects in the terrorism attacks in New York and Washington stormed a Boston hotel Wednesday.

A couple of dozen officers, wearing bulletproof vests and carrying shields, were seen bringing fiber-optic equipment into the Westin Hotel in the Back Bay section.

WHDH-TV reported the officers were using the equipment to check under hotel room doors on hotel's 16th floor, quoting a person who was inside the hotel.

Three ambulances and a police car were stationed outside the hotel as a crowd of onlookers gathered there. Police officers returned repeatedly to a police truck outside to retrieve the fiber-optic equipment, which can be slipped under doors to see inside rooms, WHDH-TV reported.

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Top Stories Headlines

Wednesday September 12 9:51 AM ET

FBI Has 700 Leads in Terrorist Probe

By JOHN SOLOMON, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - The FBI has received 700 leads in the investigation of Tuesday's twin terrorist attacks but so far no arrests have been made, a Justice Department official said.

Based on information gathered from frantic phone calls made by passengers on doomed jets just minutes before they crashed, the government believes that the hijackers were trained pilots and that three to five hijackers were aboard each of four airliners that crashed Tuesday in the worst terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil, said Mindy Tucker, Justice Department spokeswoman.

``It appears from what we know that the hijackers were skilled pilots," said Tucker.

Tucker declined to comment on evidence linking the attacks to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden or whether authorities have executed search warrants.

Lawmakers believe bin Laden may have been behind the attacks. ``I don't think everyone in Congress has enough information to make those assumptions," said Tucker.

She said investigators are following all credible leads, but declined to comment on whether the government is close to arresting anyone.

The Justice Department's terrorism, violent crimes, office of intelligence and violent crime divisions are involved in the investigation, she said. Attorney General John Ashcroft briefed 225 members of Congress late Tuesday and will meet with lawmakers again Wednesday with FBI Director Robert Mueller and FEMA Director Joe Allbaugh.

Ashcroft met with national security officials at the White House early Wednesday.

From broken bits of hijacked airplanes to intelligence intercepts, the FBI is collecting evidence in its search for those responsible for Tuesday's twin terrorist attacks.

At the Pentagon and World Trade Center, agents sifted through the rubble.

``The FBI evidence recovery team has found parts of the fuselage outside" the Pentagon, Fairfax County chief Michael Tamillow said Wednesday. ``As we go in we're now identifying smaller parts of the plane. Everyone is looking for the black box recorders." Those recorders could contain conversations from the cockpits of the doomed planes.

``Everything is pointing in the direction of Osama bin Laden," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

A flight manifest from one of the ill-fated flights included the name of a suspected bin Laden supporter, Hatch and several law enforcement officials confirmed. And U.S. intelligence intercepted communications between bin Laden supporters discussing Tuesday's attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, Hatch told The Associated Press.

``They have an intercept of some information that included people associated with bin Laden who acknowledged a couple of targets were hit," he said. Hatch declined to be more specific.

Officials cautioned it was too early to definitively assign blame but said early evidence was pointing toward bin Laden.

Ruling Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, where bin Laden is believed to be hiding, said they doubted the wealthy Arab could have been behind the attacks. Bin Laden previously has been tied to terrorist attacks against Americans overseas.

Whatever the case, each detail gathered in the hours immediately after the breathtaking devastation in New York and Washington pointed toward a carefully planned plot executed by knife-wielding hijackers to ensure the maximum casualties at two of Americas most famous landmarks.

Law enforcement officials told the AP that early evidence suggested the attackers may have studied how to operate large aircraft and targeted transcontinental flights with large fuel supplies to ensure spectacular explosions - and maximum destruction.

Thousands were believed dead in New York and Washington.

``These heinous acts of violence are an assault on the security of our nation," Ashcroft declared as thousands of federal investigators fanned out across the country pursuing leads.

``We will expend every effort and devote all the necessary resources to bring the people responsible for these acts, these crimes, to justice," he said.

Farewell phone calls from passengers and at least one flight attendant on the four targeted flights described a similar pattern: hijackers working in groups of three to five, wielding knives, in some cases stabbing flight crews as they took control of the cockpit and forced the planes toward their intended targets.

One of the passengers was Barbara Olson, the wife of Solicitor General Theodore Olson, who called her husband as the hijacking was occurring. She was aboard American Airlines Flight 77 that left Washington Dulles International Airport heading for Los Angeles but which eventually crashed into the Pentagon.

Olson told her husband the attackers had used knifelike instruments to take over the plane, and forced passengers to the back.

``She called from the plane while it was being hijacked. I wish it wasn't so but it is," Theodore Olson said.

A father in Easton, Conn., received a similar harrowing call from his adult son, who was flying with his wife and child on a plane that left Boston and eventually crashed into the World Trade Center.

Lee Hanson told authorities his son Peter called twice in short cell phone calls that cut off. In the first call, the businessman said a flight attendant had been stabbed. In the second call, the son said his plane was going down, law enforcement officials said.

``He called to his parents' home, and so in that way they were so together in that moment," the Rev. Bonnie Bardot told a memorial service held Tuesday night in Easton.

A flight attendant aboard the second jetliner that struck the World Trade Center managed to call an emergency number from the back of the airplane, an American Airlines source said. The source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the flight attendant reported her fellow attendants had been stabbed, the cabin had been taken over and they were going down in New York.

And a San Francisco woman told KTVU-TV that her son, Mark Bingham, 31, called her from aboard United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania. ``We've been taken over. There are three men that say they have a bomb," Alice Hoglan quoted her son as saying.

One investigative focus was in Florida, where agents sought search warrants amid evidence that suspected sympathizers of the accused terrorist were operating in the area, officials said.

The FBI was seeking search warrants in Broward County in southern Florida and Daytona Beach in central Florida. A car was towed by authorities at one of those locations.

Other leads were being pursued. Authorities examined a van seized in New York for possible clues, while a car found at the Boston airport where one of the planes was hijacked reportedly contained an Arabic language flight manual.

Lawmakers referred repeatedly to the terrorist attacks as an act of war warranting retaliation.

``This is a war situation we're in," Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said, adding that Tuesday's tragedy likely would alter Americans' sense of security and lead them to forgo some freedoms for added safety in the future.

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Top Stories Headlines

Wednesday September 12 10:59 AM ET

Boston Airport Breaches Investigated

By JUSTIN POPE, Associated Press Writer

BOSTON (AP) - Logan International Airport officials defended their security system as investigators started tracking the hijackers who boarded two airliners at the airport and crashed them into New York's World Trade Center towers.

Two suspects flew to Boston from Portland, Maine, the governor of Maine said Wednesday. The Boston Herald quoted a source as saying five Arab men had been identified as suspects, including a trained pilot.

Authorities said they received no unusual communications from American Flight 11, which left Boston at 7:59 a.m. Tuesday with 92 people aboard, or from United Flight 175, which took off 15 minutes later, with 65 people.

The 767s, both bound for Los Angeles, sliced into the twin towers 18 minutes apart.

``Everything seemed normal when they left Logan," said Joseph Lawless, public safety director of the Massachusetts Port Authority. ``We don't know how the hijackers accomplished what they did."

``We have a very high security standard here," Lawless said. ``We consider ourselves as secure, if not more secure, than any other airport in the United States."

Maine Gov. Angus King said two suspects had flown to Boston from the Portland International Jetport, and left behind a rental car that was impounded in the Portland area. King, who was brief by state police, said the men apparently used New Jersey driver licenses but little else was known about them.

``This information appears to open up a series of leads that I'm sure will help to identify who the attackers," King told The Associated Press.

The FBI chief in Maine, Jim Osterrieder, declined to comment on the report.

The car, a blue Nissan Altima, was identified at 11:30 p.m., Portland Police Chief Michael Chitwood said. Cigarette butts found next to the car will be tested for DNA, and the car was taken to a crime lab, Chitwood said.

Another rental car, containing Arabic-language flight training manuals, was seized in a Logan parking garage, The Boston Herald said Wednesday, quoting an anonymous source. The source said five Arab men had been identified as suspects, including one who was a trained pilot.

Authorities were led to the car by a traveler who said he got into an argument with several men as they were parking their car, the Herald reported. The traveler, who said the men appeared to be Arabs, called state police after learning the planes were hijacked from Logan, the newspaper said. It did not identify the traveler.

The Herald said two suspects flew to Logan on Tuesday from Portland, Maine. Authorities believe the two had

entered the country recently from Canada, the newspaper said. Two of the men, including the trained pilot, were brothers with passports traced to the United Arab Emirates, the Herald reported.

The Boston Globe reported one suspect's luggage did not make the connection. The bag contained a copy of the Quran, an instructional video on flying commercial airliners and a fuel consumption calculator, the newspaper said.

WCVB-TV in Boston reported the car seized at the airport had Virginia license plates. The station also said six bags of evidence were taken from the airport to the Boston FBI office, including chairs the suspects may have used while waiting to board the flights.

The FBI in Boston refused to comment on the reports.

The airport was evacuated and remained closed Wednesday.

``Clearly, there were two failures of security at Logan Airport," said Sen. John F. Kerry. ``It's not just Logan. If you have four hijackings in one day, you have a national problem."

Hijackers also crashed a plane out of Dulles International Airport near Washington into the Pentagon and another hijacked commercial flight from Newark, N.J., was crashed southeast of Pittsburgh.

Port authority officials said they planned security measures at least as stringent as those last implemented during the Persian Gulf War, including allowing only passengers past security checkpoints and eliminating curbside check-ins.

``One could speculate ... why we were chosen was because of our proximity to the New York area and the fact that we have wide-bodied aircraft leaving our airports fully loaded with fuel that participated in this tragic kamikaze-type attack," Port Authority aviation director Thomas Kinton said.

Lawless said Globe Aviation Services Corp. of Irving, Texas, and Huntleigh USA Corp. of St. Louis operate security checkpoints for American and United flights at Logan. People who answered the telephone at both companies' headquarters refused to comment.

In 1999, the major airlines at Logan and the Port Authority were fined a total of $178,000 for at least 136 security violations over the previous two years. In the majority of incidents, screeners hired by the airlines for checkpoints in terminals routinely failed to detect test items, such as pipe bombs and guns.

Also in 1999, a teen-ager who said he wanted to impress the Israeli intelligence agency allegedly sliced through a fence and settled into an empty seat on a British Airways jet and flew to London.

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Top Stories Headlines

Wednesday September 12 1:03 PM ET

Airport Security to Be Reinforced

By JONATHAN D. SALANT, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Federal Aviation Administration extended its ban on flying Wednesday and said it wasn't sure when airline flights would resume.

While transportation officials discussed when to reopen the skies to commercial airlines, FAA spokesman Les Dorr said airports would have new security measures in place before flights resume.

Even if the FAA allowed flights to resume Wednesday, Southwest Airlines said it wouldn't fly at all and Delta Airlines said it wouldn't offer any flights until 6 p.m. EDT.

Dorr declined to discuss the increased security measures but said, ``Passengers should expect to have to devote more time to the check-in process."

Passengers won't be able to check their bags at the curb, they will be subjected to random checks, they will see more uniformed security and they should at the airport even earlier.

Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta said he is acting to augment airline security after Tuesday's terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, which began with the hijacking of four commercial airliners.

``There will be higher levels of surveillance, more stringent searches," Mineta said. ``Travelers may experience some inconveniences, but we ask for your patience. We must do whatever it takes with safety as our highest priority.

Dorr advised passengers to call their airlines before going to the airport, to make sure flights are taking off on time. Many pilots did not finish their runs Tuesday, choosing instead to land at the nearest airport after the FAA halted all plane traffic.

``I think it is fair to say there is not going to be a mass exodus of planes and passengers that have been on the ground because some of the airlines have airplanes that are literally in the wrong place to fly their schedules," Dorr said.

Around the country, horrified would-be passengers watched the drama unfold on airport television screens.

``It's absolutely stunning. I think it's an act of war," said June Locacio, 58, standing at a bar at Lambert Airport in St. Louis.

At Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, long lines developed at pay phones to call friends and family.

``Someone is trying to make a serious statement, and I hope we do likewise," said Scott Gilmore, 55, who had planned a trip to Washington before all flights were canceled.

The FAA also increased airport security after the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 and the crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996.

But a series of reports by Congress' General Accounting Office and the Transportation Department's inspector general found that plenty of holes remained in the aviation security net.

The GAO and inspector general found problems with low-paid airport security screeners, who must check passengers and carryon baggage, and with equipment designed to detect bombs in luggage.

``Serious vulnerabilities in our aviation security system exist and must be adequately addressed," the GAO warned in April 2000.

Inspector General Kenneth Mead reported in January that the FAA needed to improve training for airport security screeners and increase the use of bomb-detection machines. The inspector general's office said last year that airport operators and airlines often did not conduct required background checks of employees.

Mary Schiavo, a former DOT inspector general who has been warning of lax airport security for a decade, told The Seattle Times that Tuesday's coordinated attack of four flights scheduled to take off within 36 minutes of each other was ``without a doubt an inside job" by terrorists who infiltrated airport security companies. The inspector general's office announced in August that it would assess what the Federal Aviation Administration was doing to make sure airlines were thoroughly screening passengers and their baggage.

FAA spokeswoman Diane Spitaliere said the agency would be issuing new standards for training screeners.

Rep. John Mica, chairman of the House Transportation aviation subcommittee, said Tuesday he has been ``concerned that we do not have in place the adequate emphasis on the right type of security nor the deployment of the right type of equipment."

``We've seen that a determined terrorist isn't going to be stopped by a metal detector and a couple of quick questions about who packed their luggage," said Mica, R-Fla. ``We've got to do things that have effective results."

FAA officials said they would be reviewing security procedures, but they would not go into details.

The GAO also reported in June 2000 that airport screeners had missed as many as 20 percent of dangerous objects during tests. The agency blamed the problem on high turnover, low pay and inadequate training of staff.

There have been plenty of earlier warnings about problems with airline security. Two commissions, one formed after the terror attack on Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and one after the crash of TWA 800 off Long Island, N.Y., made a series of recommendations to improve airline security. Several suggestions never were followed.

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